

# Does regulating guns result in fewer murders?

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In the debate over the federal registry for rifles and shotguns, the strongest argument on the side of those in favour of scrapping it has always been that imposing rules on law-abiding gun owners doesn't work and isn't fair. After all, criminals are not about to register their guns, so why inconvenience good citizens?

Although my instinct is to defer to police who [say](#) the registry is useful to them, I have always thought there was something to the case against, as the Prime Minister has [said](#), "attacking farmers or duck hunters." I grew up in a small town where rifles and shotguns were everyday items and I can see why a hunter might feel slighted by having to register.

Still, when you think it through, if gun regulations that only peaceful citizens comply with don't actually work, then the inherent uselessness of these rules should be evident by now in the historical data on gun offences. In other words, decades of laws that by definition only the lawful obey should have had no measurable impact on violent crime.

But that's not what the record suggests. Statistics Canada [data](#) for the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s tracks a long-term decline in homicides committed with rifles and shotguns (the firearms we regulate), against a stable rate of murders involving handguns (which police say are mostly unregulated black-market weapons).

Between 1975 and 2006, the rate of homicide involving rifles or shotguns decreased by 86 per cent, while the rate of handgun murders didn't change much. You have to wonder, why the big difference?

One possibility is that new layers of regulation on rifles and shotguns steadily made it more cumbersome to buy one on impulse and imposed more discipline on those who own and sell them. As well, police got new enforcement tools with respect to legally owned guns.

In 1969, for example, police gained the power to seize legally owned firearms, with a warrant, if they suspected somebody was going to misuse a gun. A law passed in 1977 imposed some registration requirements on buyers and sellers of guns. Safety courses for buyers were required starting in 1979. More background information and references from would-be gun owners were demanded starting in the early 1990s. As of January 1, 2001, Canadians needed a licence to buy and own guns. And then came the explosively controversial 2003 law forcing owners to register all of their long guns. (There's a handy RCMP history of firearms control [here](#).)

If the complaint that regulations do nothing but penalize peaceful hunters were true, then none of this would have made any dent at all in crime. Yet during this long stretch of regulatory reform,

murders committed with long guns declined precipitously, while killings with handguns held steady. (This is a key point: if handgun homicide were climbing as long-gun murders fell, then we might suspect that murderers were just switching.)

It's possible, of course, that there's some other explanation for the steep drop in rifle and shotgun murders. In fact, I suspect there must be other important contributing factors—there usually are many for any socially complex change in behaviour. Maybe somebody can put forward a plausible theory or, much better, point to some evidence-based research.

However, it's at least worth pausing to seriously consider that Canada has experienced a long stretch of declining murder perpetrated with the very guns that were, over that same period, subjected to increasing regulation. The onus of proof, then, surely falls on those who would now remove some of those rules.